MOTHER HOUSE

Proposal for a one-hour documentary film

"I started at the top on the main stage, and have been working my way down ever since." (from the film "Fennario: His World on Stage", NFB 1996)

I want to bring the story of this remarkable artist up to date. He has just turned 65, and has undergone major changes in the last 15 years.

He has been confined to a wheel-chair for most of this time, but has managed to write and produce four new plays. He has never lost his belief that a live performance on the stage can be the most electrifying experience, even more so than film or TV. But he has been searching for ways to make that creative force a more effective tool for social change. Inspired by Bertholt Brecht*, he has started to write plays that will call on audiences to respond, both during and after the performance.

He wants to go beyond the traditional method in which his earlier plays were presented: actors trying to interpret characters other than themselves, in sets trying to imitate real life. He now calls that method "illusionary theatre".

He is trying a different approach to the way in which the actor performs. He is writing scripts that might have several characters in them, but which can be narrated by a lead actor in such a way that it comes across as his/her own story. He/she addresses the audience instead of other actors. Sets and props and movements are kept to a bare minimum, so that the story doesn't look contrived. He wants to leave plenty of room in the script for ad-lib, so that the story can be related to what's happening in the world at the moment of the performance.

"Mother House" is one of several ideas for plays he is now developing. It responds to his outrage that Canada has started to play a belligerent role in wars declared by the US. I propose to make a film about the writing and producing of this play. He intends to direct it himself, because he knows of no theatre director interested in trying to make this new style of story-telling work. He has just started writing the first draft.

The telling of the story takes place during the October crisis in 1970, in the working-class district of Verdun where Fennario has lived for most of his adult life. His first-floor wheel-chair access apartment is just down the street from a combo development that has the shape of an old factory. It used to be a munitions plant that the people of Verdun called Mother House, because it was the factory that gave birth to the town of Verdun on the eve of the First World War.

Fennario has created a 75-year-old character called Josephina Lillian Bradley, who worked in Mother House during the First World War. She calls herself Lilibet. Fennario has Lilibet recount her life story to Jerry Nines, a young cub reporter of the Westmount Examiner. He has been told by his editor that Lilibet was jailed in 1917 as "a German spy", and that his job was to find out why she had been released shortly afterwards without a trial.

With the sound of tanks rolling down Wellington Street a block away, Lilibet tells him her story. Her father was a heavy-drinking rebellious railway-yard worker from Liverpool with an eye for the underdog. Her mother was a tea-totaling Presbyterian from Belfast.

Mother House produced the 18 lb. 4 ½ inch shell used by the British forces for long-range artillery. Lilibet was the only one in the office from Verdun. As most of the workers on the plant floor were neighbours of hers, she became the equivalent of a union foreman, in the absence of a union. Surrounded by war slogans and Union Jacks in the office, she got out of there at lunch time to join her friends on the shop floor. She learned how they would sneak 18 lb. shell casings out of the plant to take home for making ash-trays, lamps and pots for plants.

Fennario experienced the class nature of modern industry when he worked as a mail boy at the Windsor station of the CPR at the age of 16 (facilities and wages for managers vsstly superior to those for the workers). In this play, he establishes Lilibet's brother as a supervisor at the CPR. The brother gets Lilibet her office job at Mother House through his friend Hammy, who works at the CPR in public relations.

As in effect the plant's foreman, Lilibet is expected to help boost productivity on the plant floor. She learned

from her father about HG Wells' spin on the war as "the war to end all wars", a war that will result in world government and a better life for everyone. It inspires her to give very effective pep talks to the workers.

Hammy shares her belief in the war, and is seconded by the CPR to propagate Wells' message to the general public. He learns that Lilibet is a good speaker, and invites her to harangue commuting crowds at Windsor Station, and then around Montreal. Lilibet finds him smart and witty. "If it wasn't for his ears, his smile would spread to the back of his neck." In public, Hammy calls her his "secretary" or his "missionette". He buys her a fur coat, and they start a relationship. She puts up with it. She's not a Puritan.

Hammy sees himself as a media baron in the making, and gets himself invited to the First Ministers meeting in London in May 1917. He takes Lilibet along. This meeting is where Prime Minster Borden commits Canada to conscription. Lilibet becomes aware for the first time that the purpose of this war was not to maker a better life for everyone, but for the imperial powers to divide up the spoils of Africa and the Middle East.

Back home, she takes a second look at the weapons industry. She hears bosses at Mother House talking about what good profits the company is making. They talk of workers as "inventory", and of wounded and missing soldiers as "wastage".

Hammy tells her you have to live with the reality of how wars are fought and won. She sees the effects of the war on her neighbours in Verdun, most of whom have one family member working 72 hours a week at Mother House, and another one missing in action or back home with damaged limbs. More soldiers are missing than are found dead, because they were blown to bits by artillery shells of the kind being made in Mother House. City regulations are issued restricting the wearing of mourning clothes, which are considered bad for morale. Families start holding séances to communicate with the dead. Lilibet learns that Verdun has the highest enlisting rate and the highest casualty rate of all municipalities in Canada.

The break comes with conscription (Bill passed by the Borden government in August, 1917). Hammy is put in charge of the conscription drive in Quebec. He is only able to

MOTHER HOUSE

Film-maker's vision

"I started at the top on the main stage, and have been working my way down ever since." (from the film "Fennario: His World on Stage", NFB 1996)

I want to bring the story of this remarkable artist up to date. He has just turned 65, and has been living for the past 9 years in a wheel-chair, a victim of Guillain-Barré syndrome. It is the same nerve disorder that paralyzed President Roosevelt from the waist down. Fennario can't travel more than a few blocks from his Verdun home on his battery-powered wheel-chair, has to give public-transport 24 hours notice if he wants to go anywhere else, has to spend three mornings every week getting treatment in Montreal hospitals, and can't deal with his daily functions at home without the help of his devoted wife Liz. Yet during these nine years he has managed to write and produce five new plays, including the big hit "Condoville", presented at the Centaur Theatre in 2005.

Fennario has never lost his belief that a live performance on the stage can be the most electrifying experience, even more so than film or TV. But with doctors unable to give his disease a prognosis, he feels an urgent need to look for ways of making that creative force into a more effective tool for social change in the time he has left. Inspired by Bertholt Brecht*, he has started to write plays to be presented in ways that will provoke audiences to respond more directly, both during and after the performance.

He wants to go beyond the traditional method in which his earlier plays were presented: actors trying to interpret characters other than themselves, in sets trying to imitate real life. He now calls that method "illusionary" or "delusionary theatre".

His scripts now might have several characters in them, but they are narrated by a lead actor in such a way that it comes across as his/her own story. He/she addresses the audience instead of other actors. Sets and props and movements are kept to a bare minimum, so that the story doesn't look contrived. He leaves plenty of room in the script for ad-lib, so that the story can be related to

what's happening in the world at the moment of the performance.

Of the several ideas for plays that Fennario is now developing, "Mother House" is one that grips me. It responds to his outrage over the fact that Canada has started to play a belligerent role in wars declared by the US.

I share that outrage. It stems from the trauma of losing my favourite uncle when I wss 9 years old. An air-gunner, he was shot down over Germany in 1942. Three years later, I was thrilled by the founding of the UN, designed "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war". I took degrees in history at Yale and the University of Toronto with the intention of finding a career in international relations. I shared the excitement of all Canadians in 1956 with the success of Lester Pearson in getting the UN to set up its first peace-keeping regiment of blue-helmeted soldiers as a solution to the Suez crisis. And I shared the sense of commitment that most Canadians felt over the next 35 years to the role of our country as a peace-maker. I made several films reflecting that spirit: "Back to Kampuchea" (Les Productions du Regard 1982), "No More Hiroshima" (NFB 1985), "Return to Dresden" (NFB 1986), "Our Last Days in Moscow" (NFB 1987).

I felt that Brian Mulroney made the first major break from that peace-making tradition when he committed Canada to the US-led attack on Iraq in 1991. I made a film protesting that war and called it "Peace-maker at War" (NFB 1992). That break with our peace-making past continued with the participation of Jean Chrétien's government in the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999, and it has finally been put to rest almost entirely by the Harper government, first with our involvement in the Afghan war, and then with the purchase of aggressive weapons of war like the F-35 fighter aircraft.

This belligerent side of Canadian foreign policy has a history that pre-dates Lester Pearson. Fennario has lost a grand-father and a father because of it, and now has to worry about a cousin doing time in Afghanistan. He believes that the origins of this Canadian willingness to take part of wars of aggression can be traced back to the First World War, and that is what "Mother House" is about. I want to make a film about his writing and producing this

play because it would be a portrait of a great Canadian artist dealing with a life-threatening paralysis by searching urgently for new ways to make audiences aware of the imperialist nature of the wars that this country has been drawn into.

* "Brecht wanted his audiences to adopt a critical perspective in order to recognise social injustice and exploitation and to be moved to go forth from the theatre and effect change in the world outside. For this purpose, Brecht employed the use of techniques that remind the spectator that the play is a representation of reality and not reality itself. By highlighting the constructed nature of the theatrical event, Brecht hoped to communicate that the audience's reality was equally constructed and, as such, was changeable." (Wikipedia)